A Field Guide

To the

Puppets

of the Twin Cities

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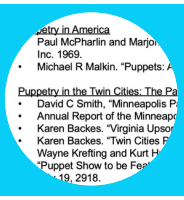

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Cover image: "Designing Puppet Costumes" c. 1930s
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Introduction

The Twin Cities are home to a large and incredibly diverse community of puppetry artists.

The scope of this project is to attempt to trace the history and lineage of the modern community of puppeteers that has been in place for slightly over a hundred years.

While I do not mean to dismiss the substantial tradition and history of puppets for play and ceremony among Indigenous nations, that is an area I do not feel qualified to speak on.

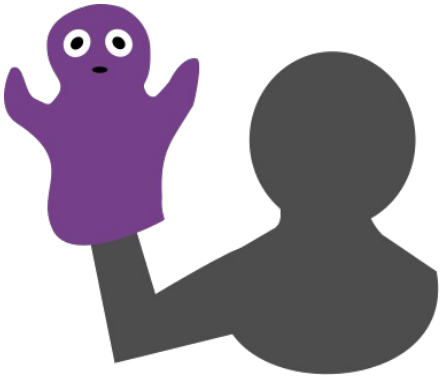
Instead of pointing to a single source for this community, I will take you through what I believe to be the underlying trends and structures that have made the Cities such rich soil for puppetry and some of the organizations that have been nurtured and blossomed here.

Throughout the past year I have conducted oral history interviews with Twin Cities puppeteers about their experiences. This zine is the product of currently twenty-seven oral history interviews, as well as archival research. For a complete list of interviewees, please check the acknowledgement section at the back.

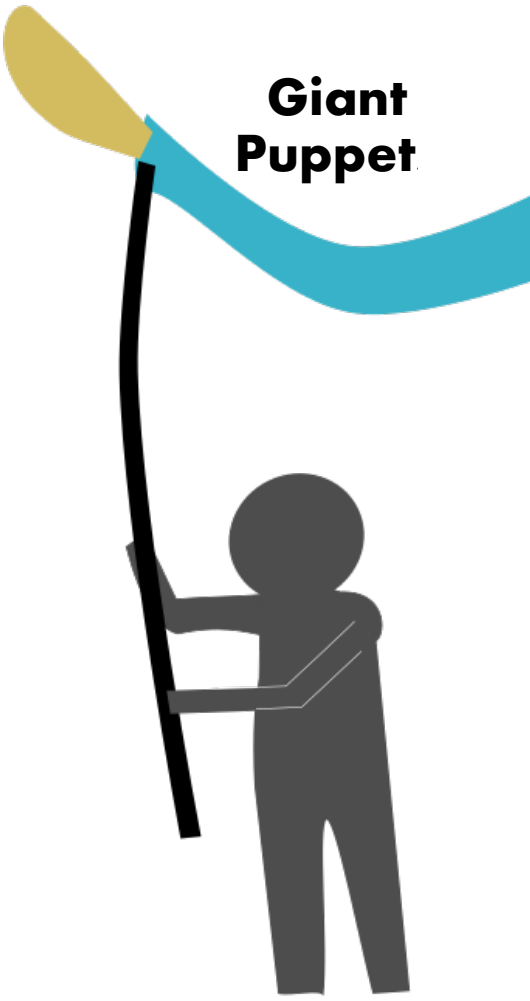
What is a Puppet?

There are many forms of puppetry and puppetry adjacent arts, and many definitions. One definition is an object, animated through performance, that the audience believes is alive.

Marionette



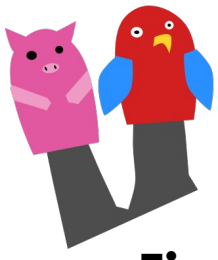
Hand Puppet



Giant Puppet

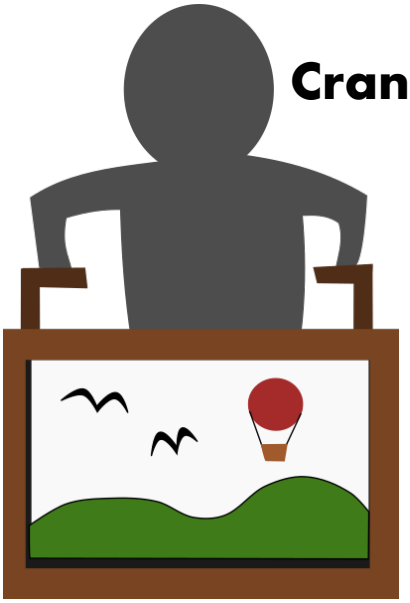
Wayang Kulit

Shadow Puppet



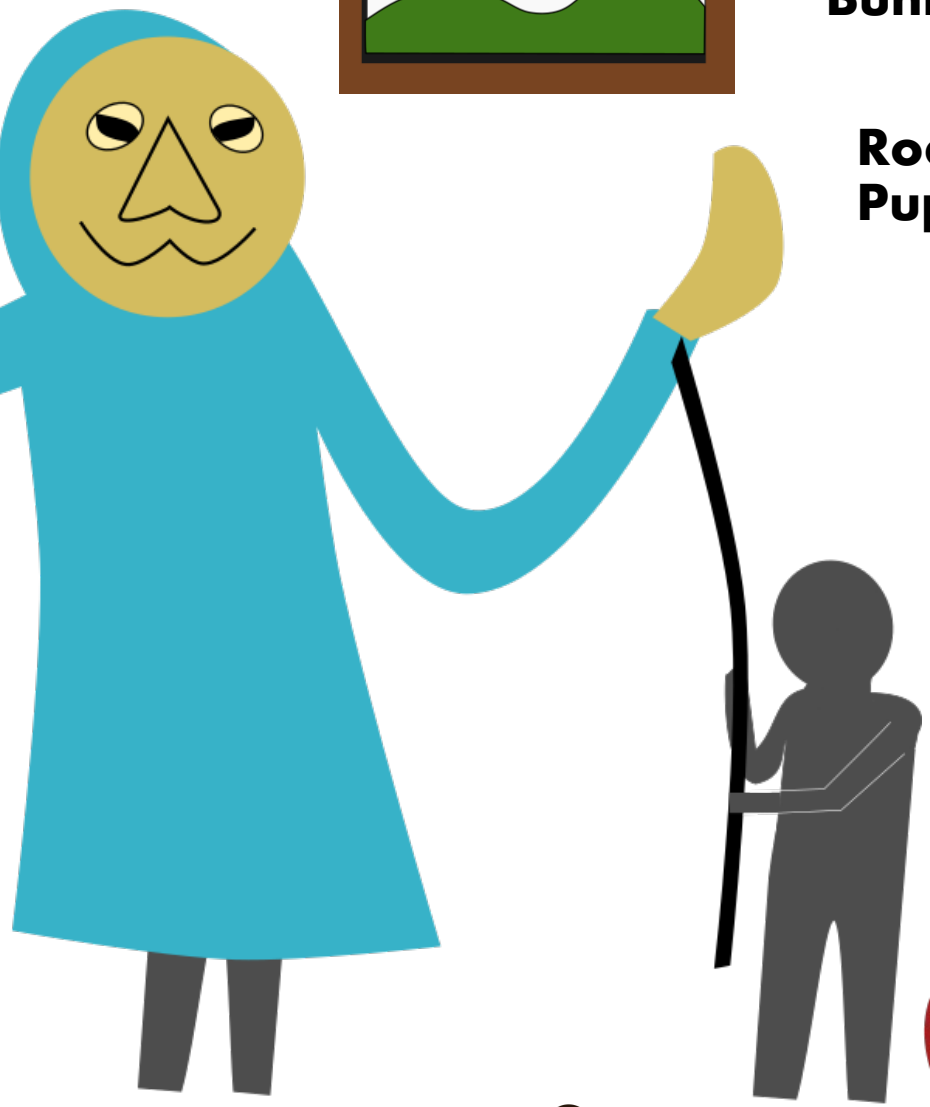
Finger Puppet

Crankie



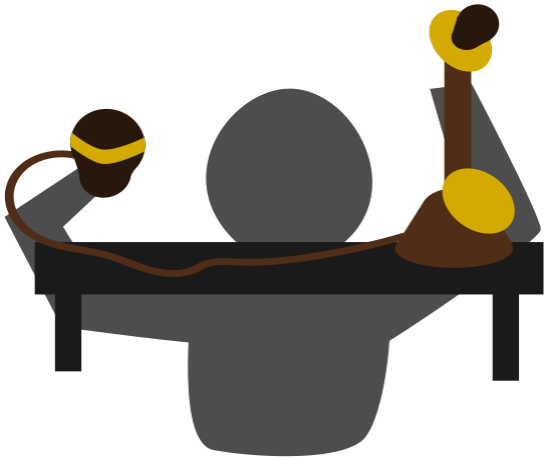
Bunraku

Rod Puppet



Mask

Live Hand Puppet



Object Theater

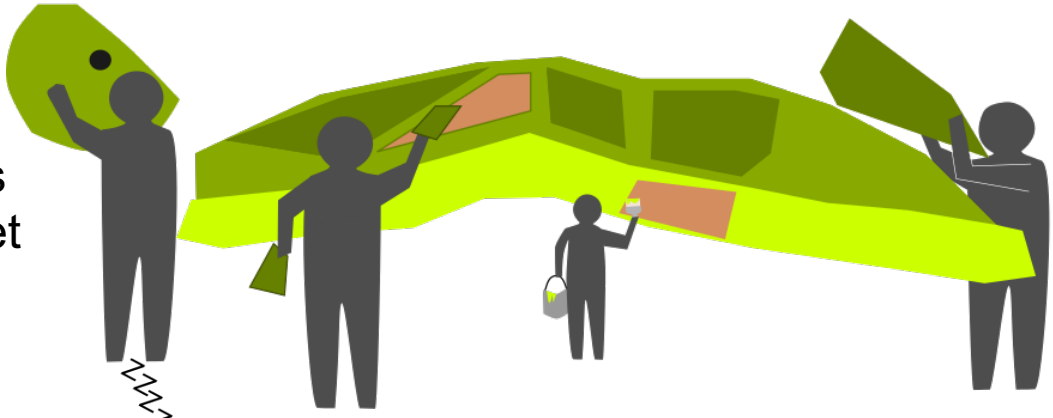
Why are there puppets here?

The puppeteers I interviewed mentioned the following reasons for why they think there's such a rich community here today:

Puppetry is an accessible art form, low materials costs make it easy to get started

Puppets help people get through the long, cold winter and celebrate the emergence of spring

Puppetry is very visible, the community builds allow people to get experience and build community



Deep historical roots of the community. Audiences are primed to engage with and appreciate puppetry

Minnesota has a lot of funding for the arts

Puppeteers are very willing to share tips and tricks on how they build and perform things

Puppetry is everywhere, you just need to know where to look

Puppetry in America

Indigenous nations used forms of what we might now consider puppets for a variety of purposes, including ceremony and entertainment. Many of these traditions were intentionally severed by the act of colonization.

Above
Orca mask, 1904, worn by Xi'xa'niyus (Bob Harris, Kwakwaka'wakw)

Right
Shaman Puppet, about 1880. unknown artist, Diomede Island, Alaska

Much of the community of puppetry that emerged in the early 1900s the United States drew heavily from the folk puppet traditions of Europe.

During this era, puppetry in America was largely dominated by marionettes, with some instances of hand and shadow puppets. The public view of puppetry was primarily of children's entertainment or as an educational medium. However, there was also a significant presence of marionettes and ventriloquism dummies as adult entertainment in nightclubs, often performed alongside magic shows.

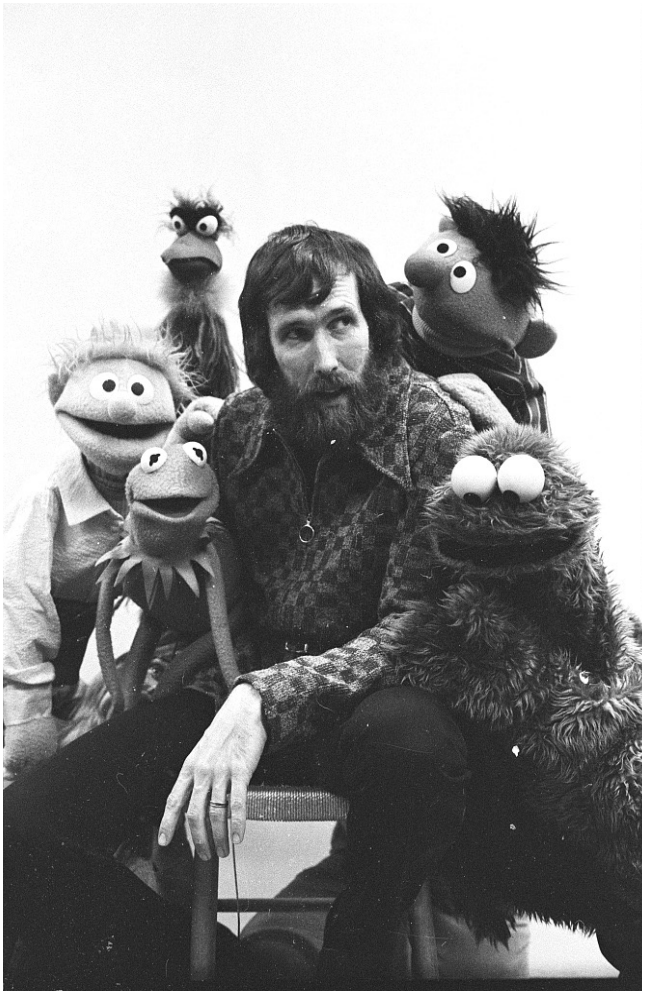
The Silver Treasure Marionettes by Virginia Upson Houghtaling for a show written and produced by the Hennepin County Tuberculosis Association.
Courtesy Hennepin County Library

A striptease marionette by Bob Bromley, performed nightly at the Minnesota Terrace Lounge at the Nicollet Hotel, in the 1940s.
Courtesy Hennepin County Library

The term “puppeteer” itself was an American creation, coined between 1912 and 1915 by Ellen Van Volkenberg, cofounder of the Chicago Little Theater. Before this, puppeteers were referred to as the puppet master, the puppet-player or occasionally the puppetman.

The Puppeteers of America was founded in Detroit in 1936, to bring together puppetry professionals, hobbyists and those with an interest in puppetry. P of A would host the annual (changed in 1997 to be biannual) American Puppetry Festival, which continues to this day.

Following the popularization of television throughout the 1950s and 60s, many people found puppets entering their homes through children's or family entertainment, first as part of local TV shows and then those with national syndication. The most famous of these properties would be Jim Henson's Muppets, part of a sea change away from more traditional marionettes. At this same time, companies like Peter and Elka Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre centered community activism and puppetry as public, political art.



Jim Henson, with the Muppets, 1971.
Courtesy Library of Congress

A Bread and Puppet Parade, the 1980s
Courtesy Bread and Puppet

The popular puppetry scene remained predominantly (though not exclusively) white. This would diversify through the latter half of the 20th and into the 21st century as puppeteers of color were able to claim and create their own spaces, drawing on both traditional and modern styles.

Puppetry in the Twin Cities: The Park Pageants

Beginning in 1918, the Minneapolis Park Board staged an annual end of summer pageant in Lyndale Park, on the shore of Lake Harriet. The pageants, often based on fairy tales, would feature more than 1,500 children in homemade costumes.

For the first two years, the pageants were directed by North High School teacher Julia Beckham. Beginning in 1920, the pageants were written and directed by park board employee Alice Dietz. The following year, Dietz was allowed to personally retain the copyrights for her scripts. The pageants continued, with a 1932 hiatus for the Depression, until 1941 when it was incorporated into the Aquatennial.*

A group of teddy bears in “The Wishing Ring” undated. Courtesy Minnesota Digital Library

Performances ran for a night or two, and often attracted crowds of over 40,000. While not puppetry per se, the costumes and public performance are evocative of the MayDay and BareBones performances that would come decades later.

A costumed child, likely from the 1925 pageant “Sleeping Beauty.”
Courtesy Minnesota Digital Library

* The Aquatennial was originally a Teamster’s picnic before being coopted by business interests.

The crowd at Lyndale Park, watching the pageant, 1937.

Courtesy Minnesota Digital Library

Even after the end of the pageant, Minneapolis parks would continue to host puppet shows and classes during the summers on a semi-regular basis. In 1926, the park board sponsored a community education marionette making class taught by local puppeteer and magician Cedric Lindholm. One of the attendees, Virginia Upson (later Houghtaling), had recently been introduced to puppets by her camp counselor, Margaret Skewis (who would later become a nationally known puppeteer along with her husband, Rufus Rose).[4] Throughout the 1920s and 30s Upson would build and perform puppets locally in department stores and throughout the state for the Minnesota Public Health Association. In the era before most families had a television, puppetry was an effective and relatively straightforward way of delivering educational content to children.

Virginia Upson, 1945. Courtesy Virginia Houghtaling scrapbook.

Libraries

In 1928, after seeing several puppet shows, including several by nationally renowned puppeteer Tony Sarg, high school student Bob “Andre Vern” Longfield was inspired to start making marionettes. Following his graduation, Longfield performed shows and taught puppet making classes at local libraries, curating a 1931 exhibit on puppetry at the Minneapolis Central Library of about ten local puppeteers.

Branch libraries would also host their own puppet shows by local artists, often seasonally in the summers and at Christmas.

Above: Bob Longfield (L) performs for polio patients Ryman (C) and Dicks (R) at the Sister Kenny Institute, c. 1943. Courtesy Hennepin County Library

Below: Corporal Bob Longfield and Florabelle entertain soldiers at Fort Sam Houston, TX. C. 1940. Courtesy Hennepin County Library

The WPA

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to stimulate the economy by providing out of work Americans with short term employment. It funded everything from construction of roads and bridges to local puppet theaters. Minnesota was one of twenty states to have a puppetry division. The program utilized both the sewing and construction skills of thousands of craftspeople but also trained puppeteers in performance and teaching arts.

Puppetry was organizationally based in the Recreation Department, under the Division of Women's and Professional Projects. It also substantially overlapped with the Handicrafts Department. The Minnesota puppetry program was managed by Deborah Meader, who directed training and logistics as well as the performances themselves.

Deborah Meader (L) and Mrs. Bernard Druck (R) a child psychologist, 1948. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Meader had begun to pursue puppetry after seeing a Punch and Judy show with her daughter. She was only able to find two puppetry books in the St. Paul library, so she pursued her own methods for puppet and stage creation. In the late 1920s, following an accident that left her husband unable to work, selling puppets and stages became the primary income for her family. In 1929, she opened the Deborah Meader Puppet Shop. Meader designed and patented a variety of portable puppet theaters, which were then manufactured by her husband and father. She also sold puppets and scripts and supplied educational shows to the National Dairy Council and the Bureau of Dental Hygiene in Iowa.

Above: Hand puppet made for a WPA production of Ivanhoe, 1935.
Right, Below: Marionettes for "Creation of the World," 1937.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Throughout the early 1930s, Meader traveled around the state doing puppetry workshops sponsored by the Federal Emergency Relief Act, and the Civil Works Administration, both WPA precursors, which would lay the ground work for her eventual direction of the WPA program. In the WPA, Meader trained builders and performers on an almost industrial scale. Workers were trained to create, to perform, or to work with children and create their own shows.

Her work was influenced deeply by respect for children and a belief that the collective action born of puppetry was core to democratic ideals and therefore a vital part of fighting fascism.

Meader credits the Workers' Education Puppet Troupe, a program of the WPA in Minneapolis, with laying a foundation for puppetry with a core social message in the Twin Cities.

Workers' Education Puppet Show, 1937
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

One of the most popular plays created under Meader's supervision was *Creation of the World* based on an Ojibwe creation story. The show also demonstrated the synchronicity of the WPA. The story was told to a WPA historical researcher by an Ojibwe elder as part of an oral history project. The story was then dramatized by a writer with the Federal Writers Project, and adapted for the stage by Meader.

The marionettes were made by the handicrafts department and were dressed in leather clothes, beaded by Ojibwe artists who were also employed by the WPA. The show debuted at the 1937 state fair.

A performance before the debut of *The Creation of the World*, State Fair 1937
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Meader would also teach puppetry classes for several years at the University of Minnesota. Puppetry classes have been intermittently offered by the U through to present day. The WPA puppetry program was terminated by Congress in 1939, along with the rest of the Federal Theater Project in response to the mandated racial integration and accusations that the program had been infiltrated by Communists.

Patients with puppets at the Lymanhurst Cardiac Clinic, Minneapolis c. 1940
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Meader and her family left the Twin Cities in 1942, but she would continue to speak on the importance and utility of puppets until her death in 1980. Many of the people who received WPA performance training would continue to pursue puppetry.

Children constructing puppets c. 1937
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

"Puppetry has proved to be a successful method of teaching literature, the social studies, religion, health and safety, and has been used successfully in library work, the field of occupational therapy, recreation and adult education. There is a form of puppetry adaptable to all ages"

-Deborah Meader

The following are real excerpted questions from the midterm examination for Meader's puppetry class:

Mid-Term Test in Puppetry

The following statements are true or false. Place + before true statements and – before those that are false.

1. It is a disputed question as to whether puppets do interest children.
2. Group action is the foundation of fascism.
3. The basic objective in handling a puppet is to make it appear to be alive
4. Puppet plays are apt to reduce children's interest in reading.
5. All puppets and setting should be as realistic as possible.
6. It is unnecessary to have an elaborate stage and puppets to begin puppetry.
7. Right and left is the actor's right and left.
8. Lighting helps to intensify atmosphere and mood.
9. An amber light would help to produce an evil mood.
10. A puppeteer attempts to stir up desired reactions in the audience with their voice.
11. All stories should be dramatized
12. Speeches for puppets should be short and clear.
13. Marionettes are adapted for specialties and tricks
14. Human figures of marionettes are more easily operated than animals
15. The voice of the puppeteer is more important than any other element in the casting of a puppet play.
16. Keep the speaking puppet still.
17. When two or more characters enter, the speaker enters first.
18. Cooperation is developed in giving a puppet play.
19. Shy children are released from the self consciousness by the protection afforded by the screen.
20. A shadow production takes longer to prepare than a hand puppet production.

1.F 6.T 11.F 16.F
2.F 7.T 12.T 17.T
3.T 8.T 13.T 18.T
4.F 9.F 14.F 19.T
5.F 10.T 15.T 20.T

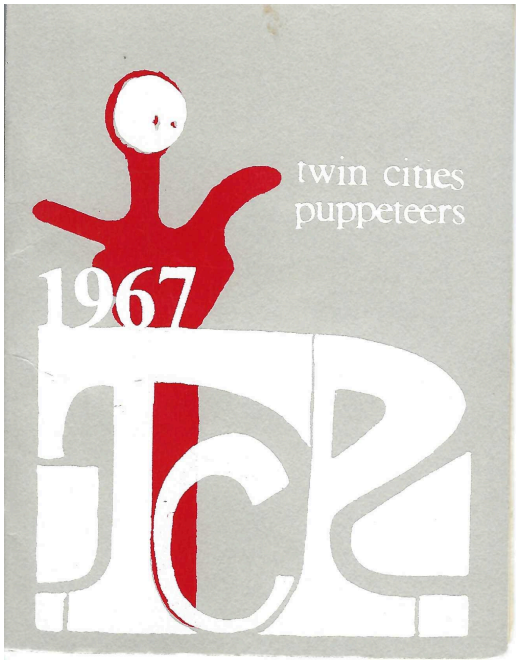
The Twin City Puppeteers

In December 1937, puppeteers from Duluth and the Twin Cities formed a local chapter, the Northwest Puppet Guild, covering Minnesota and the adjoining five states. The membership skewed predominantly to Duluth, with Duluth-based puppeteer Dell Wheeler serving as president.

In 1939, following the regional festival held in St. Paul that spring, the St. Paul and Minneapolis groups voted to disaffiliate from the Northwest Puppet Guild and establish their own independent organization, the Twin City Puppeteers. A motion was made to restrict the total group size to twenty people, so that it could meet conveniently in members' homes. They would assist in hosting the 5th Annual American Puppetry Festival the following year in St. Paul.

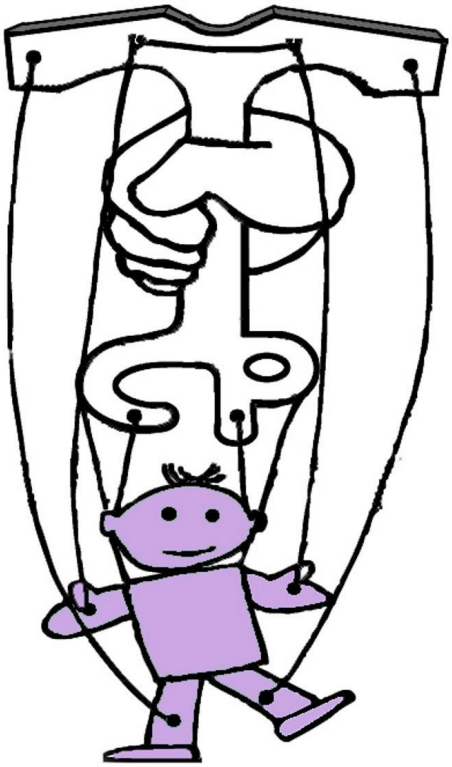
The guild would grow throughout the 1950s and would become a charter guild of the Puppeteers of America in 1962. This also came with a name change to the "Twin Cities Puppeteers." They released a newsletter, edited by Paul Eide, who would later serve as P of A President and edit the national Puppetry Journal. Though guild members mostly worked independently and came together to share skills and tricks, the group did collaboratively stage a production of Ali Baba throughout the 60s and 70s.

Irene Odegaard, Vice President of the Twin City Puppeteers (and a former WPA puppeteer) shows the marionettes she will perform in a production of the Naughty Marietta, 1946.
Courtesy Hennepin County Library



Cover of the 1967 newsletter.
Courtesy Twin Cities Puppeteers

Paul Eide at the 1975 National Puppetry Festival
Courtesy Twin Cities Puppeteers



New logo, designed in 1995 by Paul Eide.
Courtesy Twin Cities Puppeteers

The Twin Cities Puppeteers became a nonprofit in 1986, and many members would go on to serve key roles in the Puppeteers of America.

The group hosted national festivals in 1953, 1994, 2005, 2005, 2017 and 2019, more than any other metropolitan area.

By the mid 90s, the rise and spread of other puppetry organizations meant that the guild no longer served as the singular gathering place for Twin Cities puppeteers.

Though less active now than in its heyday, the Guild still hosts several annual events, a spring celebration for World Puppetry Day, a summer picnic and yard sale and a winter holiday party. They also maintain an active email newsletter for local puppetry events curated by marionettist Kurt Hunter.

For more information:

Website: TCPuppet.org

TwinCitiesPuppeteers

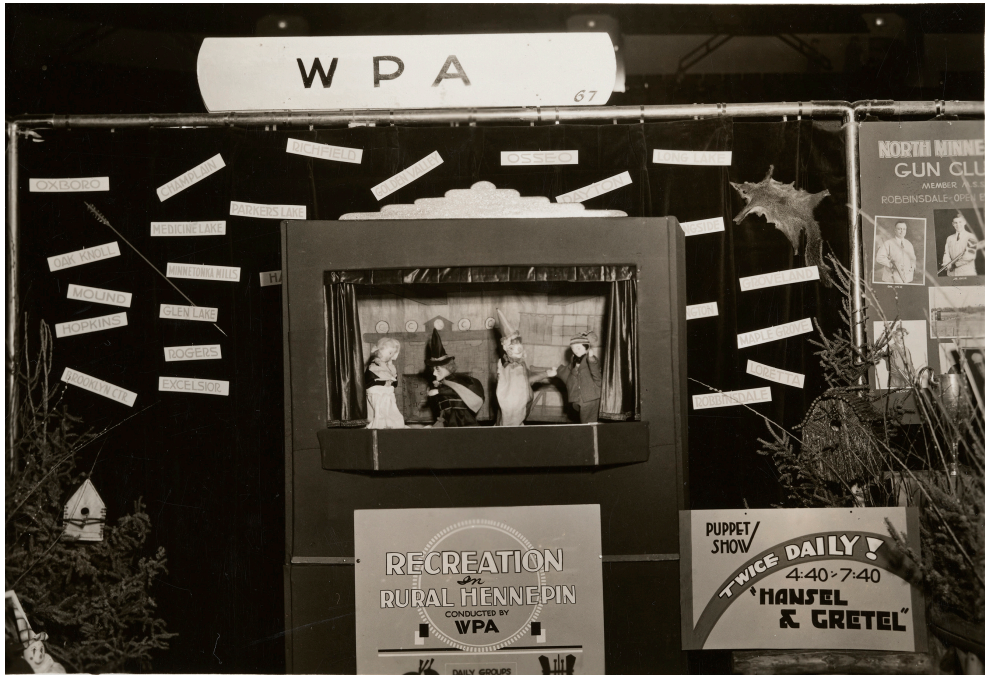
A sampling of historical puppets

Dorothy Laidlow (L) and Mildred Bakke (R) preparing for a tour, 1935.
Courtesy Hennepin County Library

Ruth Cole, age 17, shows off the marionettes she built, 1940.
Courtesy Hennepin County Library

Publicity photo for a WPA marionette show, at the State Fair, 1937.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Publicity photo for the Creation of the World show, at the State Fair, 1937.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society



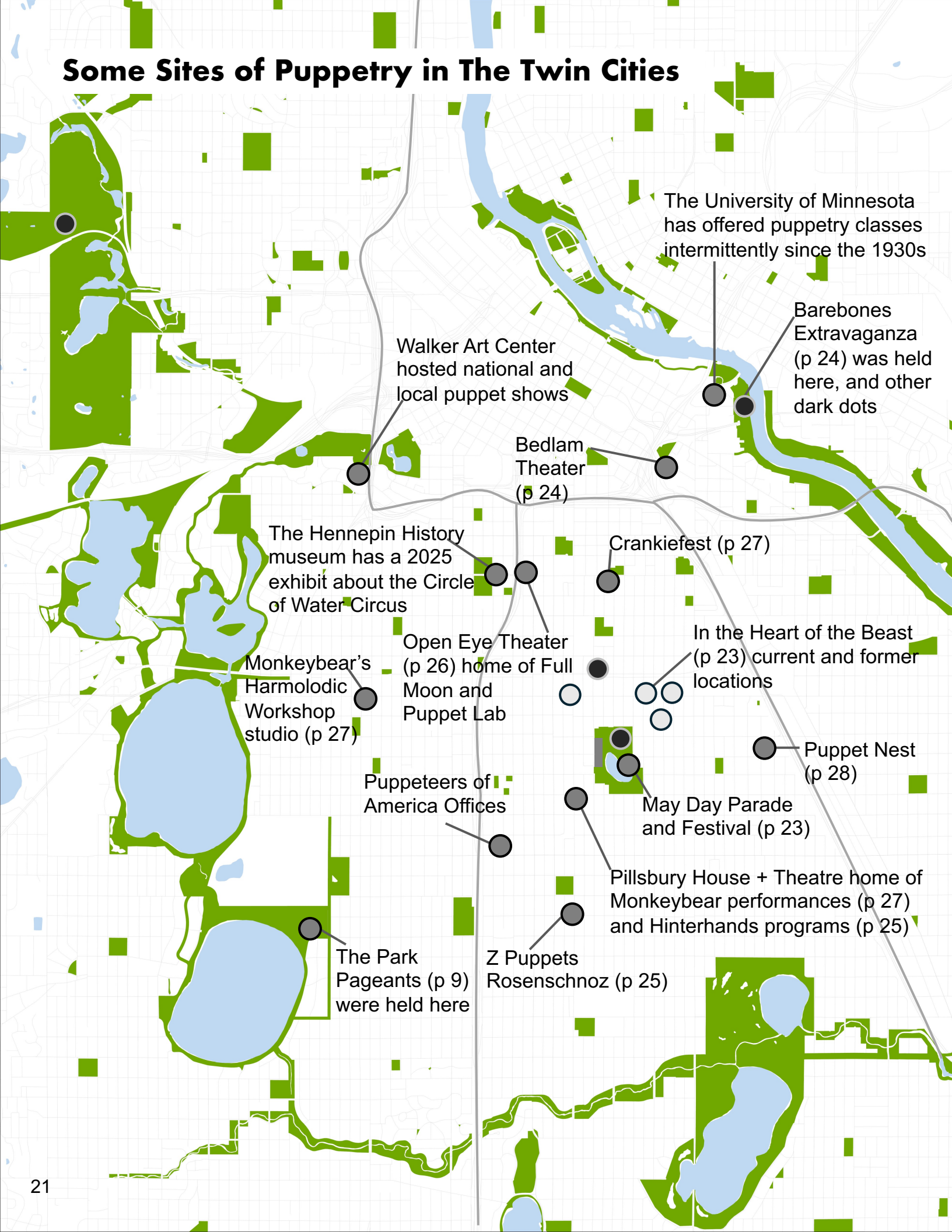
Hennepin County Recreation Puppet Show, WPA, c 1940.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

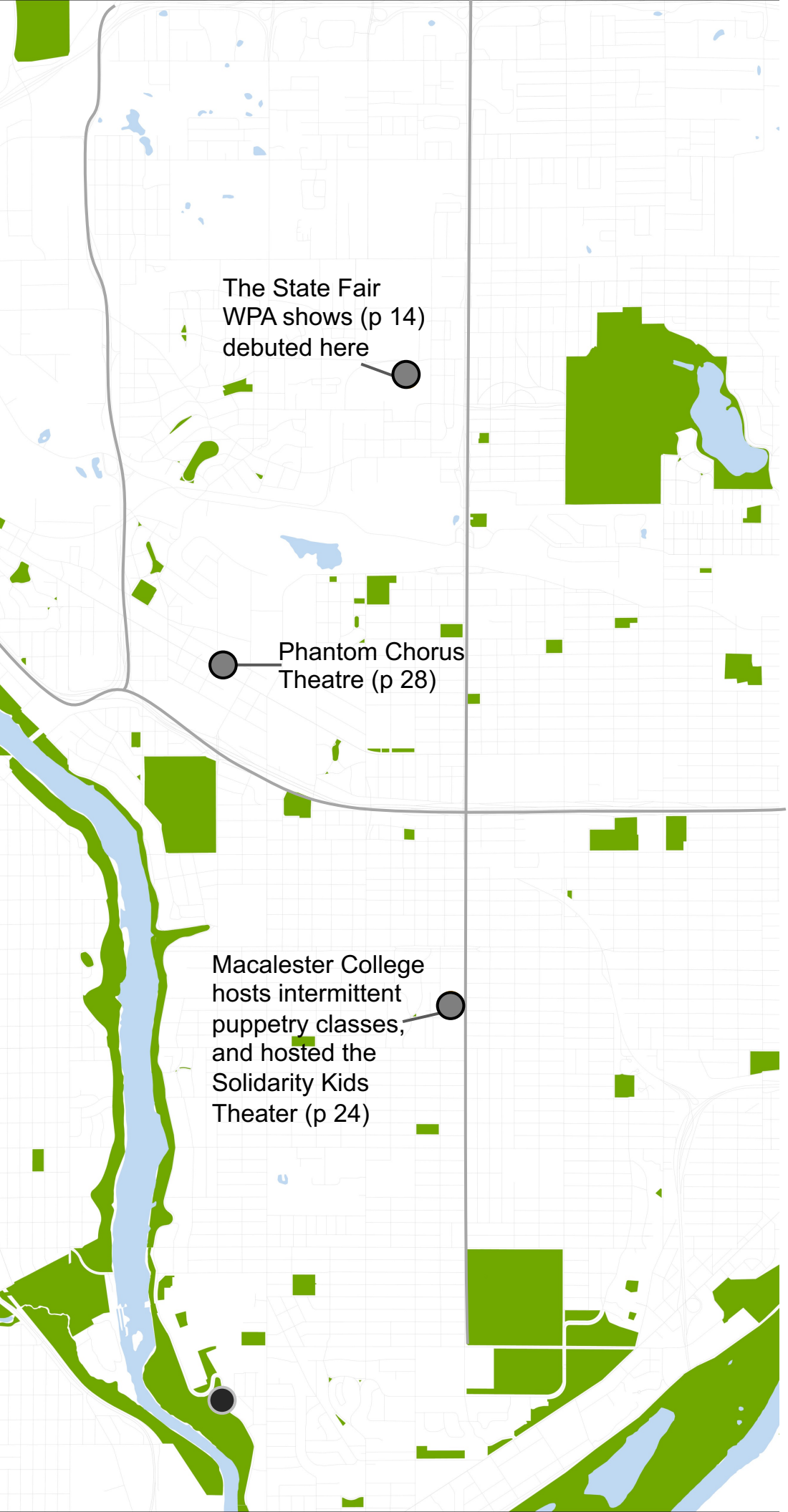
Deborah Meader provides instruction in Shadow Puppet, c 1939.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Puppet show in Linden Hills Playfield, 1931.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Bernard Reuper and several children showing hand puppets in Hamel, MN 1938. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Some Sites of Puppetry in The Twin Cities


The University of Minnesota has offered puppetry classes intermittently since the 1930s
Barebones Extravaganza (p 24) was held here, and other dark dots
Walker Art Center hosted national and local puppet shows
Bedlam Theater (p 24)
The Hennepin History museum has a 2025 exhibit about the Circle of Water Circus
Crankiefest (p 27)
Open Eye Theater (p 26) home of Full Moon and Puppet Lab
In the Heart of the Beast (p 23) current and former locations
Monkeybear's Harmolodic Workshop studio (p 27)
Puppet Nest (p 28)
Puppeteers of America Offices
May Day Parade and Festival (p 23)
Pillsbury House + Theatre home of Monkeybear performances (p 27) and Hinterhands programs (p 25)
The Park Pageants (p 9) were held here
Z Puppets Rosenschnoz (p 25)


The State Fair WPA shows (p 14) debuted here
Phantom Chorus Theatre (p 28)
Macalester College hosts intermittent puppetry classes, and hosted the Solidarity Kids Theater (p 24)

The locations on this map, explored more on the following pages were sourced primarily from the oral history interviews.

Would you like to be interviewed? Do you have additional sites you think are important to puppetry in the Twin Cities, or have corrections or more information you would like to share? Please reach out!

You can find contact info on the final page.

In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre

The theater in 2021, courtesy Max Haynes

The theater that would become In the Heart of the Beast was founded in 1973 as the Powderhorn Puppet Theatre by David O'Fallon and Ray St. Louis. Their first show debuted on the 4th of July, 1973 in Powderhorn Park.

Shortly thereafter they were joined by others, including Sandy Spieler, who would become artistic director in 1977. The theater underwent a name change in 1979, as several members of the company- Sandy Spieler, Margo McCreary, Steven Linsner and Curtis Sloan adopted a the current name, inspired by a Che Guevara quote after Jose Martí. The theater moved into its current home, the Avalon Theater (formerly a pornographic theater) in 1988. HOBT created award winning mainstage shows, and hosted puppet cabarets including a Saturday Morning children's matinee series. The community centered ethos also involved teaching residency programs for students in the neighborhoods around the theater. In 2019, following several years of financial volatility, the theater laid off most of its staff and severely reduced programming, and in 2024 the decision was made to sell the building and look for a smaller space. The theater continues to support a Saturday morning puppet story time, occasional shows, and a library of their puppets that community members can check out.

For more information:

Website: Hobt.org facebook.com/hobt.org intheheartofthebeast

MayDay

The first annual MayDay parade and festival was held in 1975 by In the Heart of the Beast, it and many subsequent MayDays midwifed by Sandy Spieler. MayDay celebrates rebirth, the emergence from winter and is aligned with the International Workers' Day. The celebration is supported by several large community puppet builds. The parade processes to Powderhorn Park where the festival is held. Following extensive artist input about the logistical feasibility of continuing the festival, in 2019 HOBT made the decision to pause and review future support for MayDay and in 2023 announced that they would no longer be continuing it to host the celebration. The parade and festival continue to exist, supported by decentralized community groups. In 2025, the Semilla Center coordinated artist builds, continuing the original spirit.

May Day festival in 2019, courtesy Max Haynes

For more Information:

Current website: Maydaympls.org

Historic info: Sandyspieler.com/mayday

Bedlam Theatre

Bedlam was founded in 1993 by Maren Ward and John Bueche as a space for radical, community engaged theater. While not explicitly a puppet space, they hosted a variety of puppetry works including Full Moon (page 26) and BareBones (below). The theater had several homes, primarily in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood, before closing in 2016.

BareBones Puppet Theatre

BareBones' Annual Halloween Extravaganza is the closing to May Day's opening, celebrating the arc of the seasons into winter. It has been produced annually at a variety of sites around the Twin Cities since 1994. It began as "Sam Hain's Flaming Pavement Puppet Show," Alison Heimstead's senior thesis. Designed to continue in a nonhierarchical model, each show has co-directors, a team of artists and a series of community builds to create the giant puppets. Throughout its history BareBones has hosted a number of residencies and produced a variety of summer and winter outdoor shows.

The 2019 Halloween Extravaganza,
by Carolyn Whitson

For more information:
Website: barebonespuppets.org barebonespuppettheatre barebonespuppets

Solidarity Kids Theater

The Arthur and Edith Lee Story
Courtesy Greg Poferl

Initially conceived of in 1994 as a way to keep kids engaged during American Postal Workers Union conventions, Gregory Poferl and Howard Kling's Solidarity Kids Theater created politically conscious guerilla shows. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the theater debuted a new performance annually at the Meeting the Challenge conference at Macalester College and toured to schools nationally. Shows were designed to be short, punchy and easy to teach, and were designed with the input of the children themselves. Poferl continues to create shows using the Solidarity Kids ethos, including the show at left in 2017.

Z Puppets Rosenschnoz

Founded in 1998 by Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith (originally called *Circus Minimus Puppetry*) Z Puppets Rosenschnoz has connected to audiences through a mix of puppetry and music including original work and artist residencies centering mindfulness, playfulness and the power of imagination.

Several of their recent projects have also centered Cherokee futurism and language revitalization in *The Tales of ᏗᏚᏏ Dagsi Turtle & ᎯᏅᎠᏕ Jisdu Wabbit.* Their location, the ᏕᏚᎩ Gadugi Building also hosts a pop-up window gallery for Native artists, with grant support from the City of Minneapolis.

Chris Griffith and Shari Aronson with puppets from *Through the Narrows*, Courtesy Z Puppets

For more information:
Website: Zpuppets.org littlerednose zpuppets

Mad Munchkin Productions

Created in 2005 by Laura Wilhelm and Alan Pagel, Mad Munchkin creates collaborative works including original productions and an annual cabaret. Their initial mainstage shows were produced as a part of the Minnesota Fringe Festival and they held shows at a variety of venues including Dreamland Arts (now The Hive) Bryant Lake Bowl, Squirrel Haus Arts and In the Heart of the Beast.

The company has been on hiatus for the past few years, and several of the artists involved in Mad Munchkin went on to found Phantom Chorus (p 28)

For more information:
Website: Madmunchkinproductions.com (now only available on the web archive)

Open Eye Theatre

The theater began in 2000 as Open Eye Figure Theater founded by Michael Sommers and Susan Haas with goals of building community, creating art and making theater accessible. One of their long running programs is The Driveway Tours, portable pop-up shows that come to communities across the Twin Cities. In 2007, the theater moved into a physical space, where they produce and host shows, both puppet and otherwise. Haas stepped down as executive director in 2020, and she and Sommers continued to create new work independently. The theater is currently run by Producing Artistic Director Joel Sass.

For more information:

Website: Openeyetheatre.org openeyetheatre

Open Eye is also the home to two other long running puppetry programs:

Full Moon Puppet Show

Full Moon began in 2008 when Liz Howls Schachterle and a group of friends set a goal of creating a puppet show every full moon. The cabaret style shows, with musical acts ran for three years (and thirty-six shows) at a variety of sites around Minneapolis. After a few breaks, shows transitioned to be quarterly, and now annually. Performers apply and receive a stipend and dedicated time with a mentor to help develop their skills and create a 10 minute show. Full Moon also supports a series of puppetry technique workshops periodically throughout the year and mutual aid workshops where artists receive a stipend to build large puppets for community nonprofits. Full Moon is in the process of becoming its own independent nonprofit.

For more information:

fullmoonpuppetshow

Puppet Lab

Created in 2010 by Alison Heimstead, originally at In the Heart of the Beast, Puppet Lab is a six-month residency to help support emerging puppeteers to create their own original show. Four individual (or groups) are selected each year from applicants, who receive mentorship and a stipend to bring their vision to life. The program ran at HOBT until 2019, when it moved to Open Eye. Puppet Lab is currently under the artistic direction of Oanh Vu and Sofia Padilla.

For more information:

Website: Openeyetheatre.org/puppet-lab

Hinterhands Puppet Company

The first production of Bart Buch's Hinterhands Puppet Company was *kid enkidu* in 2013, co-produced with In the Heart of the Beast.

Courtesy Hinterhands

Before Hinterhands, Buch ran Puppet Camp OUT from 2000 to 2005, a program to provide workshops and training to LGBTQIA youth ages 13-19. As a part of Hinterhands, the program began anew in 2021, for youth ages 14-20 to create alongside adults age 60+, in partnership with Pillsbury House + Theatre.

Hinterhands also hosts the Wish Work Puppet Series, Saturday morning performances of all ages shows, facilitated by Seth Eberle, a continuation of the spirit of In the Heart of the Beast's former Saturday matinee shows.

For more information:
Website: Hinterhands.com
hinterhandspuppet

Monkeybear's Harmolodic Workshop

Monkeybear supports Native, Black and POC puppeteers to develop creative and technical puppetry skills. It was founded in 2016 by Chamindika Wanduragala. From a single weeklong intensive it has grown to offer several programs:

Erica Warren and Tim Blighton, 2024.
Courtesy Oanh Vu

The **Puppet Performance Intensive**, a weeklong training focusing on a different method of puppetry each day. Alumni of the intensive can participate in **New Puppetworks**, a biannual eight-month paid mentorship cohort program to create short original puppet theater pieces, performed at Pillsbury House + Theater. New Puppetworks alumni can participate in **Puppet Cinema**, a biannual (held on alternating years from New Puppetworks) eight-month paid mentorship cohort program to create a short, filmed piece. Monkeybear does not accept applications, rather those interested should contact Chamindika.

For more information:
Website: Monkeybear.org
monkeybear.puppetry

Crankiefest

An intimate backyard show, begun in 2022 by Olli Johnson and Felicia Cooper. Crankiefest is a three-evening annual show highlighting diverse forms of the crankie, a story scroll with convergent origins all over the globe. Performers apply and are selected by a panel to curate a show with a diversity of styles and experience levels.

The term crankie (or “cranky”) was coined in the 1960s by Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, but have roots as far back as the 4th century in India. This type of puppetry then spread throughout the rest of Asia, where it took on a variety of forms such as emakimono in Japan. In late 18th century Europe they were called “moving panoramas” which later spread to the United States.

For more information:
Website: Crankiefest.cargo.site mplscrankiefest

Puppet Nest

In 2021, In the Heart of the Beast closed its offsite warehouse, which held a substantial collection of the puppets that had been made at the theater since its founding. Artists were offered the opportunity to collect puppets they had made, but a significant number of puppets, including some complete shows remained. The longtime artistic director Sandy Spieler, with community support, was able to construct a new building in her backyard to house a number of the puppets.

The Puppet Nest opened officially in November of 2023, and community members are able to borrow the puppets.

For more information:

Website:
sandyspieler.com/puppet-nest/

Phantom Chorus Theatre

Founded in 2022 by Thalia Kostman and Marc Berg, Phantom Chorus is a company that specializes in collaborative, original works often combining elements of fantasy and horror. Their work has been frequently featured at the Fringe Festival and they also stage their own independent shows.
Videos of several of their full-length works are available on their YouTube channel.

For more information:
Website: phantomchorus.com phantom.chorus phantomchorustheatre

The Oral Histories

The largest component of this project has been the oral histories. There have been currently twenty-seven oral history interviews for this project.

Oral history interviews allow us to get people's personal reflections and qualitative experiences in ways that don't often show up in traditional archival sources. The primary goal of the oral history isn't to validate written sources, but to provide another perspective and source of information.

The process is structured over two meetings:

The Pre-Interview

- Usually thirty minutes to an hour
- In a place the narrator is comfortable with, often a public space
- For introductions, review of the consent form (next pages) and questions about the project.
- Ends with scheduling the interview

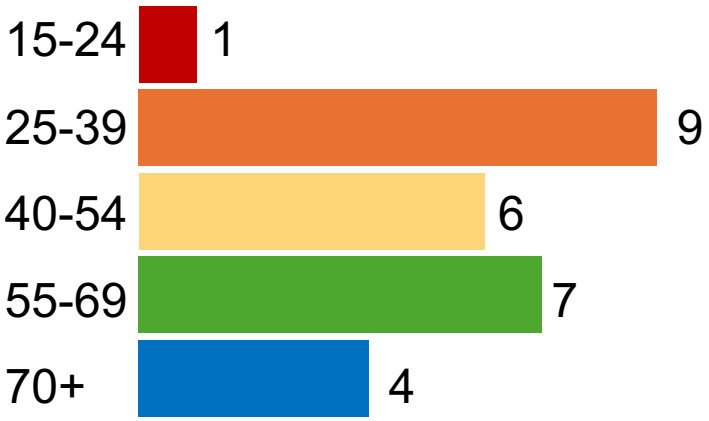
The Interview

- Can be between a half hour and two hours or more.
- Often a quiet place, particularly if there is audio recording
- Review and fill out the consent form, and then start the interview itself
- Very conversational, the narrator has control over what questions they want to answer and how.

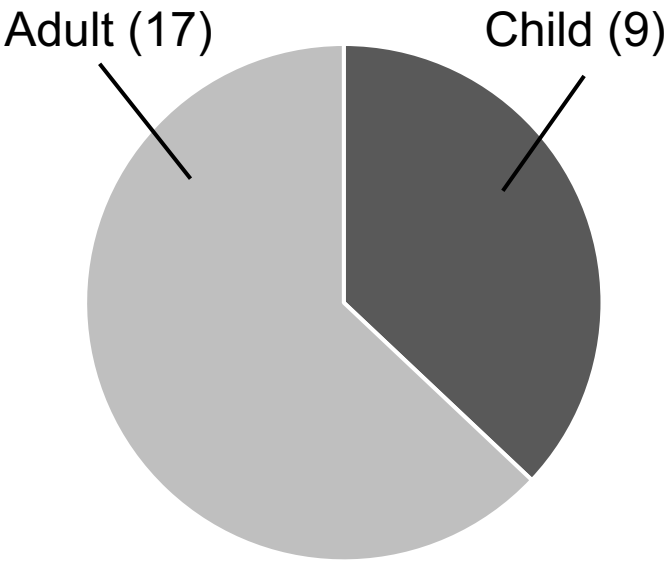
Following the interview, I transcribe the recording (if one was taken) and send it to the narrator to review. The narrator is able to remove or change any part of the transcript they want. Any changes will also be removed from the audio.
After the narrator's final approval, any materials will be donated.

Of the Puppeteers Surveyed

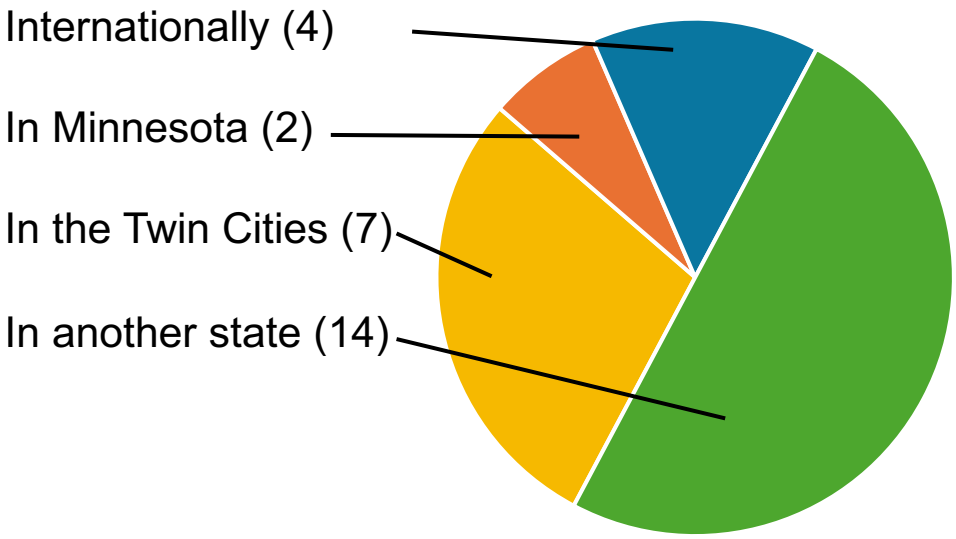
Their ages at the time of the interview was:



They first described developing an interest in puppets as an:

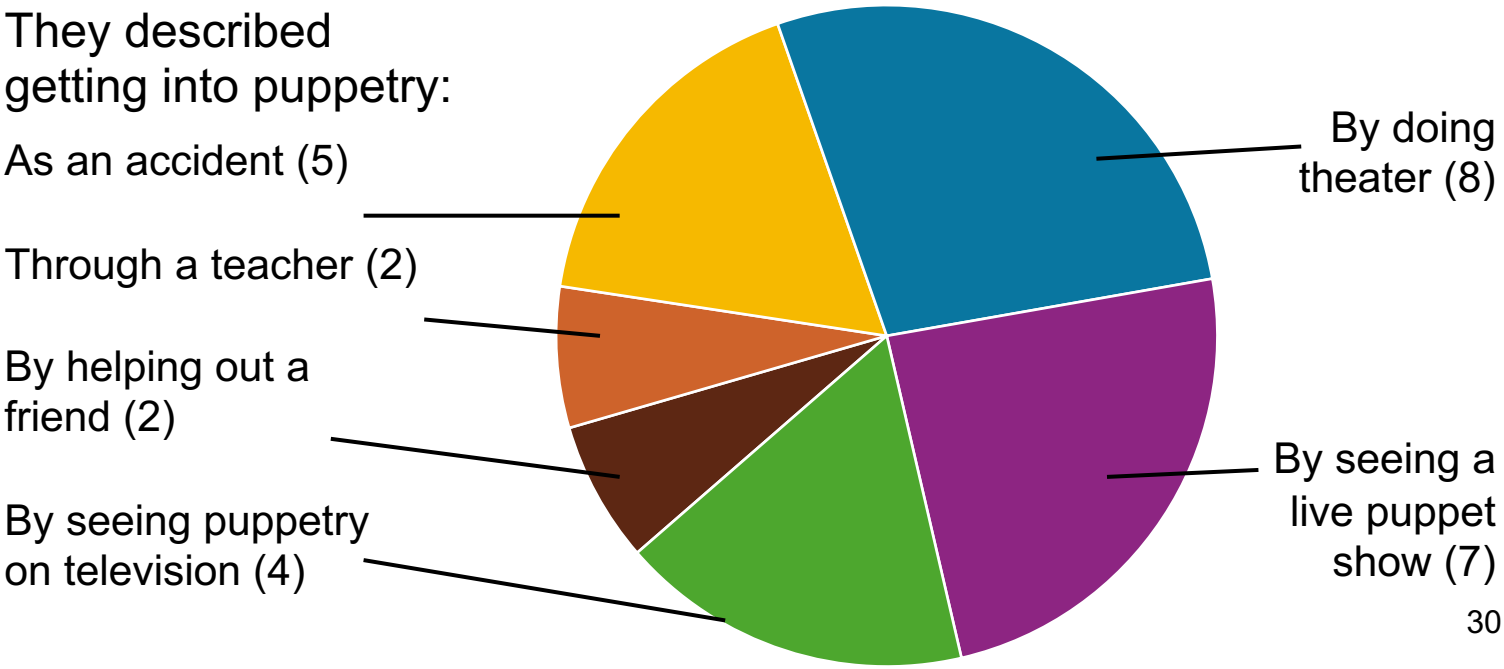


They grew up:



You might notice that most of these add up to a greater number than the total number of oral history narrators. This is because some people described multiple experiences.

They described getting into puppetry:


As an accident (5)
Through a teacher (2)
By helping out a friend (2)
By seeing puppetry on television (4)
By doing theater (8)
By seeing a live puppet show (7)

The Consent Form

Twin Cities Puppet Oral History- Informed Consent and Release

The Twin Cities Puppet Oral History Project is a research project by Jennings Mergenthal as a part of the Heritage Studies and Public History master's program at the University of Minnesota. The project will be exploring the history of the puppetry scene in Minneapolis and St. Paul and seek answers to three main questions:

- Why is there a puppetry scene in the Twin Cities?
- How has the puppetry scene grown and evolved over time?
- Who are the puppeteers who have made this community so vibrant and active?

This oral history interview, as well as others, will inform the two outputs of this project:

- A puppet show about the history of the Twin Cities puppet community.
- An accessible zine explaining how the puppet community began, how it evolved and where it is today.

This is the zine you are reading right now

In the Heart of The Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre is serving as the community partner for this project, and providing support through access to their collections and connections.

The recordings and transcripts created from this interview will become part of the historical record. All recordings will be donated to the Hennepin County Library and the Hennepin History Museum where they will be stored, become part of a collection finding aid, and presented on the internet for scholarly and personal use along with any abstracts or transcripts of the recorded content.

Interview information

Your interview will last approximately one to two hours, but the length of the conversation will ultimately be determined by you.

You will be asked questions about your background, your artistic practice, your career, other aspects of your life. With your consent, your interview will be recorded. Also with your consent this recording will be indexed and transcribed so that others can find it.

You may unexpectedly revisit memories that bring up strong emotions. You are free to decline to answer any questions that make you do not wish to answer or to stop the recording or interview at any time.

You will receive a small stipend as appreciation for your time. You may choose to either receive, waive, or donate your stipend.

Participants receive a $60 stipend. Since many participants run their own nonprofit puppet programs, there is an option to donate the stipend

Interview Questions

There are a few standard questions that will be asked of all participants in some form

- How would you describe your artistic practice? Would you consider yourself a puppeteer or is there another term that resonates more with you?
- How did you get into puppets?
- How did you come to be in the Twin Cities?
- Are there particular puppets/shows that have a special place in your heart?
- Are there mentors or peers who have helped shape you?
- Why do you think there is such an active puppet scene here?
- Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that we haven't had a chance to?

In addition to these, we will work to develop some specific questions about your life, artistic process, and areas of the puppet that you've engaged with.

These are questions I ask everyone, but each time they are answered in totally different ways

Your rights

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. You may stop your participation at any time during the interview.

Under this agreement, you keep the copyright to your interview, but agree to share it under a Creative Commons Attribution--NonCommercial 4.0 International license. This allows the public to freely copy, remix and build on your interview, but only if they credit the original source and use it for non-commercial purposes.

When the interviews are donated, I am giving up my rights as interviewer to the institution, but the narrators' rights are preserved

Consent Form Questions

In these checklists, the top option is the most permissive, and they get more restrictive as they go down

Are you comfortable with (please check one)

☐ Audio recording being used for transcript and archived
☐ Audio recording being used for a transcript but **NOT** archived
☐ Audio recording being used for notes
☐ I am not comfortable with audio recording

Are you comfortable with (please check one)

☐ A transcript being made of your words and archived
☐ A transcript being made of your words, but **NOT** shared
☐ Notes being taken and archived
☐ Notes being taken but only kept privately
☐ I am not comfortable with a transcript or notes being taken

It's very important to allow people to review what they've said, to ensure they're accurately represented

I would like to (please check one):

☐ Review and edit my transcript prior to its archiving
☐ Not review and edit my transcript prior to its archiving
☐ There will not be a transcript/notes of my interview

I would like to (please check one):

☐ Receive my stipend
☐ Have my stipend donated to the following puppet-related organization: _____
☐ Waive my stipend

I understand that the audio recording (if made) and transcript (if made) will be housed at the Hennepin County Library, in any storage format or medium, to be available for research, and to be administered in accordance with relevant policies.

I retain any and all copyrights I may own in my interview, but I have authorized public distribution of my interview using a Creative Commons Attribution--NonCommercial 4.0 International license. It is understood that this agreement covers original recordings and any transcript or other reproduction of the originals made by researchers and librarians.

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and I understand it. I have been encouraged to ask questions and I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this oral history. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this consent form.

I understand that I have been offered the opportunity to review and edit a transcript of my interview before it is made available, and that I will have the right to edit and anonymize my narrative if desired.

This signed document is required in order to publicly archive the interview and the transcription/ notes. Your personal information will not be archived with the interview or shared in any form.

Participant Print Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date:_____

Interviewer Print Name: _____

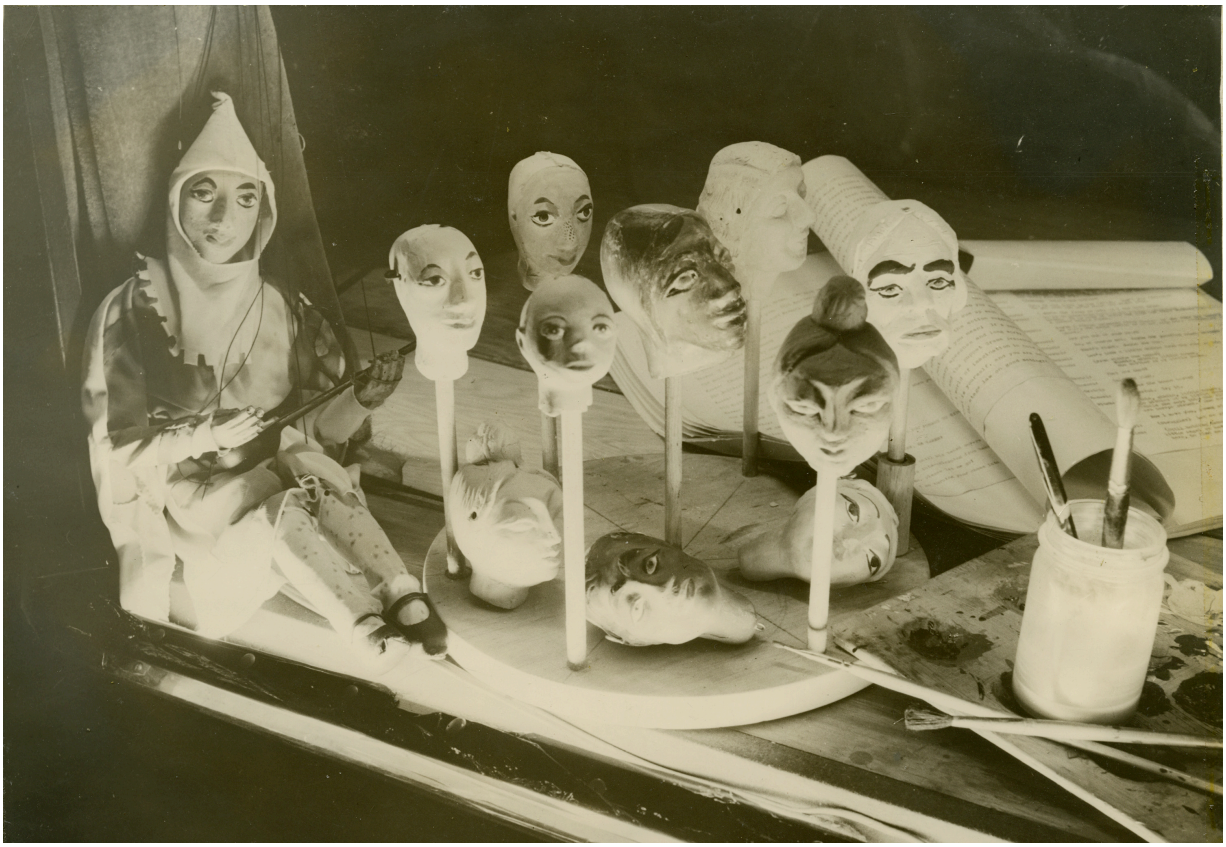
Interviewer Signature: _____ Date:_____

If you would like to receive your stipend, I also need the following information in or[illegible] compensate you, but this information will not be disclosed with th[illegible]

Telephone:	
[illegible]	

This page isn't very interesting! But I feel like its important to show the whole form.

A further sampling of historical puppets



Painting Puppet Heads, c 1937
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

“Give Recognition to your Puppeteer” c 1937.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

WPA Handicraft marionettes made for Minneapolis schools,1937.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Children & instructors showing hand puppets. Columbia Heights, 1938.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

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About the Author

Jennings Mergenthal (they/them) is, believe it or not, a serious historian in addition to being a puppeteer.

This zine is the product of two years of research for their Master's Degree in Heritage Studies and Public History at the University of Minnesota.

You can reach them at MERGE061@umn.edu

Photo by Bruce Silcox

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For more information about the project, please visit puppetstudies.org/oral-history

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